Section of the History of Medicine

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Meeting
November 5, 1958

The Last Illness of Oscar Wilde

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London

AT ten minutes to two on the afternoon of November 30, 1900, there died in Paris a man so famous, or perhaps I should say infamous, that his assumed name of Sebastian Melmoth concealed from but few the fact that he was Oscar Wilde.

Having achieved fame, popularity and success as a poet, a playwright and a wit, he became notorious as a profligate and a homosexual, was shunned and scorned as a convicted felon; finally to be fortified by the Rites of the Holy Catholic Church into which he was received but two days before he died.

The certified cause of death was cerebral meningitis and almost all who knew him felt that his mode of living contributed towards his death at the early age of 46. With the exception of Frank Harris, none of his biographers who have dealt with the cause of his death have doubted that neurosyphilis was responsible for his terminal illness and that persistent alcoholic excess hastened his end.

This I do not believe, because, without wishing in any way to condone or deny his habits, I think that a careful study of his life and of his last illness must lead to the conclusion that he died of nothing less than an intracranial complication of suppurative otitis media. Such a disaster, for disaster it was in the days before antibiotics and modern surgery, can occur at any age, often to those who have led blameless lives. Nobody could say that Oscar Wilde led a blameless life; but regular indulgence in the accepted pleasures, as well as in some of the less acceptable vices, of life, does not close the door to other causes of death. In those days the part played by chronic ear disease in the causation of terminal intracranial infection was rarely appreciated; so it is not surprising that his death was attributed to his folly and self-indulgence which were obvious, rather than to an obscure ear infection which he himself had always concealed.

But, if our opinion of his terminal illness is to be something more than casual surmise, it will be advisable to enquire into his family and into his past history as well as into the events which led to his death.

He was born in Dublin in 1854, the second son and child of Sir William and Lady Wilde and was given the names Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Some thirty years later when speaking of his name he said: "My name has two O's, two F's and two W's." He added: "A name which is destined to be in everybody's mouth must not be too long; besides it comes so expensive in the advertisements."

These extraordinary names were not surprising as they were given him by unusual parents. His father was the leading oculist and aurist of the day. He also had an international reputation as an archæologist, and received his Knighthood in 1864 for his services in connexion with the Irish census. A small man of great energy and drive, he suffered from asthma and, despite his appearance and general behaviour, was attractive to and attracted by women. In fact, a serious scandal with one of his female patients ended in a libel suit and his social and professional eclipse.

Oscar's mother wrote patriotic verse and pamphlets under the name of "Speranza". Besides being a poetess and an ardent Irish Nationalist, she was a poseuse. She was tall, rather heavily built and, for those days, heavily made up. She was certainly an unusual woman who not only treated her second son Oscar as a girl, which she had so fondly hoped for, but also dressed him as a girl during his early years. It has been suggested that this was the basis for his sexual inversion.

A daughter, Isola, was born in 1857 and died, of what is not recorded, ten years later. She was a family favourite and Oscar wrote of her in one of his earlier poems:

> "Tread lightly, she is near,
> Speak gently, she can hear
> The daisies grow."

Sir William Wilde died in 1876 at the age of 61 and Lady Wilde in 1896 at the age of 70, while Oscar's brother, Willie, older by two years, predeceased him by a year.

Trained as a barrister, Willie became a journalist and is said to have drunk himself into an early death. The two brothers had little in common and Willie as the elder could never accept his younger brother's fame and success in face of his failure to make a name for himself.

Dr. Macdonald Critchley in a medical appreciation of Oscar Wilde mentions that Willie was known by the contemptuous nickname of "Wuffalo Will"; this was no doubt inspired by his lack of success as the second husband of a rich American widow. Their marriage did not last long as she expected her new husband to manage the family business, but Willie's idea was to make the business work for him.

When Oscar was released on bail after his first trial he was refused entry to every hotel, thanks to the activity of the Marquess of Queensberry, and so, late at night, in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, he sought refuge in his mother's home in Oakley Street, Chelsea. Willie let him in and, relating the experience not without relish to his friends afterwards, in a remarkable mixture of metaphors which perhaps indicates his muddled ways, Willie said: "Oscar came tapping with his beak against the window pane and fell down on my threshold like a wounded stag."

The Wildes were not a long-lived family, but apart from Sir William's asthma and a tendency on the part of all the male members of the family to drink too much there is nothing of any great significance in the family history.

Oscar grew up to be tall and, though heavily built, seems to have been remarkably healthy. He was indolent and disliked all forms of physical exercise, declaring that he neither liked to kick or be kicked. Though large and on the fat side and avoiding all forms of athletics and most athletes, he was powerful enough and never ran away from any form of trouble either then or later. One night the Junior Common Room at Magdalen decided to raid Oscar and smash up his rooms, including the famous "blue china". The first three or four members of the advance party were thrown downstairs by Wilde and he carried the fourth, who was also the ringleader, down to his own rooms and buried him underneath his own furniture, then inviting the onlookers to join in drinking the ringleader's health in his own wine.

Throughout his adult life he over-ate, over-drank, and persistently refused to take exercise. His capacity for alcohol was legendary, and on many occasions saw under the table those who had set out to make him drunk. He had a pose of being idle but in reality he must have been a hard and a quick worker, for he produced a lot in the twenty-odd years of his working life. What he disliked was any form of routine and set hours of work; but he was undoubtedly capable of hard and effective work for short periods. He is said to have finished his greatest play, possibly the greatest drawing-room comedy ever written, "The Importance of Being Earnest", in three weeks.

He always admired youth, beauty and health and at the same time had an almost morbid dislike of age, ugliness and disease; so it is not surprising that nowhere except in "De Profundis" and at the very end of his life do we hear anything from him about personal illness. You will recall that in "De Profundis", a long letter written while in prison to Lord Alfred Douglas, he described how, when they were staying in Brighton, he nursed Douglas through an attack of influenza; and how when he caught it, Douglas neglected him.

It is generally believed that he contracted syphilis while an undergraduate at Oxford, and the bad state of his teeth has been attributed to the mercury which is said to have resulted in a cure.

Robert Sherard refused to believe that the crime for which Oscar Wilde was convicted was committed consciously and he attributed it to an epileptic state brought about by over-indulgence in food and drink. Sherard was a simple but loyal soul who refused to believe ill of his friend, though his explanation must appear to most as a piece of special pleading. Bernard Shaw quotes Oscar as having written to Sherard from prison advising him "Don't fight more than six duels a week".

The first record of any ear trouble comes from Lord Alfred Douglas who, when visiting Wilde in the public interview room in Holloway Gaol in April 1895, where he was awaiting trial on a charge of homosexuality, wrote "Poor Oscar was rather deaf. He could hardly hear what I said in the Babel". This certainly was not otosclerosis; it could have been nerve deafness and of course syphilis inevitably comes to mind as the cause. It could, however, have been any form of unilateral deafness such as might happen with chronic suppurative otitis media.

Some months later in Wandsworth Prison, before he was transferred to Reading, Wilde was taken ill with giddiness, sickness and earache.

He was forced out of bed to attend Chapel. He fell down, and his ear bled and discharged at least for months afterwards.

As this is the first mention of any infective ear disease it will be as well to report Frank Harris' account of what Oscar Wilde told him about the incident.

"One Sunday morning after a very bad night I could not get out of bed. The warder came in and I told him I was ill.

" 'You had better get up', he said; but I couldn't take the good advice.

" 'I can't', I replied, 'You must do what you like with me.'

"Half an hour later the doctor came and looked in at the door. He never came near me; he simply called out 'Get up; no malingering; you're all right. You'll be punished if you don't get up', and he went away.

"I had to get up. I was very weak; I fell off my bed while dressing and bruised myself; but I got dressed somehow or other, and then I had to go with the rest to chapel, where they sing hymns, dreadful hymns all out of tune in praise of their pitiless God.

"I could hardly stand up; everything kept disappearing and coming back faintly; and suddenly I must have fallen." He put his hand to his head. "I woke up feeling a pain in this ear. I was in the infirmary with a warder by me."

"Aren't you a little deaf still", I asked.

"Yes," replied Oscar, "on this side, where I fell in the chapel. I fell on my ear you know, and I must have burst the drum of it, or injured it in some way, for all through the winter it has ached and it often bleeds a little."

This then is the first mention of giddiness and ear discharge, though it had already been noted by Douglas that he was deaf in one ear. It is probable that he had an old otitis media and that the episode just described was a flare-up of this chronic otitis media which caused some labyrinthine irritation and which continued to discharge until some five years later it eroded through the roof of the middle ear to spread to the meninges and possibly adjacent temporal lobe.

R. H. Sherard who visited him in prison at Reading found him to be distinctly hard of hearing. Apart from this episode, prison life seemed to have suited him physically. After he had served a year of his sentence, some friends hearing that he was in the prison hospital made representations to the Home Secretary that he should be released before the end of his sentence on the grounds that his health was being jeopardized by prison conditions.

Two members of the Prison Commission went to Reading to investigate the matter and they were taken to the prison hospital where, unobserved, they saw Oscar entertaining the rest of the inmates of the ward. Polished, urbane, and as talkative as ever, he kept the rest of the ward in fits of laughter, and they hung on his every word. Consequently the visitors had to report back to the Prison Commission that Oscar was certainly not suffering physically and not obviously mentally from his sojourn in prison. After he had served his full two years he came out much fitter than when he went in. He left at once for Dieppe in May 1897, and never returned to England again, spending the remaining three years of his life first at Dieppe, later in Italy, Switzerland, the Riviera and finally Paris. He soon returned to his old habits of over-eating and over-drinking whenever he could afford it and also, alas, to his sexual inversion.

Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

FIG. 1.—Oscar Wilde shortly after his release from prison.

Artistically he was finished. During the last few months of his prison sentence he wrote "De Profundis", a letter to Lord Alfred Douglas which, even allowing for natural bitterness and histrionic despair, must be one of the most dreadful letters ever written to anyone. After

his release he worked hard for some months on "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", a moving and possibly over-dramatic poem of the execution of a soldier for the murder of his unfaithful wife, and, moving though this ballad undoubtedly is, one can sense throughout it all a whiff of midnight oil. This is quite unlike his previous work, and it is indeed sad to think of the dreadful and deadening effect of prison surroundings on one who had been the very prince of laughter and lightness.

Frank Harris in 1899 notes that Oscar was getting deafer and deafer in one ear, so that they had to change places in the theatre in order to talk to one another. As so often happens, neither Harris nor anyone else mentions which ear was affected, though for reasons which will emerge later it may have been the left ear.

Now, it has been fashionable to decry Frank Harris and to regard everything he said as suspect. But his "Life of Oscar Wilde" which was first published in 1916 was, in the 1938 edition, given a long preface by Bernard Shaw, who was prepared to corroborate much of what Frank Harris said; though he made no bones about Frank Harris' habit of inventing little incidents.

Frank Harris, like Wilde's other biographer Robert Sherard, was always ready to champion any cause or person in which he thought cruelty or injustice played a part. Neither was versed in the art of beating about the bush, or to use a legal term, wrapping it up.

Again Bernard Shaw in his preface to Frank Harris' "Life of Oscar Wilde", referring both to Harris and Sherard, remarks "As to his (Harris) being a hypocrite, his deficiency in this most necessary and invaluable art of social intercourse was equalled only by Mr. Sherard's. Their inability to dissemble their likes and dislikes takes them to the very verge of indecent exposure".

In the main, however, Harris exhibited a strong vein of practical common sense, not unusual in adventurers. He predicted that if Oscar Wilde persisted in his action for criminal libel against the Marquess of Queensberry, the action would fail and then he would be open to prosecution on a criminal charge, which is just what happened.

In 1899 and again during the early summer of 1900 while in Rome, Wilde developed a rash which he attributed to mussel poisoning. He attended several public audiences with the Pope, and attributed his temporary relief from the rash to these audiences. To an artist friend who suggested painting a picture to commemorate the occasion he remarked: "The trouble is that mussels do not lend themselves easily to any art form—of course you could paint their shells, but then you see I didn't eat the shells." This rash has been regarded as a manifestation of syphilis, but it is much more likely to have been an allergy or a dermatitis secondary to vitamin deficiency as the result of his drinking. However, this rash returned after he left Rome and persisted on and off till his death some months later.

Again Frank Harris recounts a conversation he had with Oscar Wilde about this rash.

> "I ate some mussels and oysters in Italy, and they must have poisoned me; for I came out in great red blotches all over my arms and chest and back.
>
> "I'm all right, Frank, but the rash continually comes back, a ghostly visitant. It generally returns after a good dinner, a sort of aftermath of champagne."

On his return to Paris in the later summer of 1900 he continued to drink heavily. Despite generous friends he was always hard up, having wildly extravagant tastes. Fate had turned him not only into a sponge, but also into a sponger. Jean Dupoirier, the owner of the Hotel d'Alsace who befriended Oscar and who actually supported him in his arms as he died, said that Oscar used to drink a litre of brandy a day in the hotel, quite apart from anything he had outside in the way of absinthe or wine which was often quite a lot. Oscar dined out and visited cafés most days except when, as he put it, "I was kept indoors by a sharp attack of penury".

In August 1900 when dining with Douglas in Paris he gave the first hint that all was not well with him, saying: "Somehow I don't think that I shall live to see the new century. If another century began and I was still alive, it would really be more than the English could stand." Douglas never saw him again after this meeting.

He was at this time, thanks to the kindness of the proprietor, living on credit at the Hotel d'Alsace in the Rue des Beaux Arts, a modest but quite respectable hotel in a small street on and parallel with the Left Bank of the Seine off the Rue Bonaparte.

I have visited the hotel and been shown the rooms in which he lived and died. A small back bedroom leads into a sitting room which overlooks a small paved courtyard with two shady trees in it. The daughter of M. Dupoirier was still there though she was but a young girl at the time of Oscar Wilde's death.

In early October 1900 he was troubled with severe headaches and was under the care of the British Embassy doctor and also a French

physician. On October 10, a week before his 46th birthday, a surgeon was called in and Wilde had an operation on the ear; which ear is not known. All we know about this operation is that it was carried out in the hotel, and that afterwards the ear had to be dressed daily for many weeks. It could have been a paracentesis of the eardrum or the removal of a polypus; but the prolonged daily dressing suggests that there may have been an open wound. It would indeed be ironic if he had been submitted to the then fashionable Wilde's incision for mastoid infection; a procedure introduced by and called after his father.

On October 29 he got up and with Robbie Ross went by cab from café to café drinking absinthe. Reginald Turner who tried to moderate Oscar's drinking was told: "You are qualifying for a doctor. When you can refuse bread to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, you may apply for your Diploma."

Of another friend who came to see him, Wilde said: "I showed him what hospitality I could, I even shared all my medicines with him."

On November 28, two days before his death, his great friend Robbie Ross returned to Paris in response to an urgent telegram. He found Oscar in a desperate state, but even so out came a last witticism. Referring to the dark red wallpaper with roses on it he murmured: "This wallpaper is killing me. One of us has got to go." There is no record of his saying anything more. Ross sent for a priest, Father Dunne of the English Passionists, in order that Oscar might be received into the Catholic faith. Though just conscious Wilde could not speak, but signified his assent to the priest's questions with a movement of one hand. Which hand, I wonder? Ironic that one who was a very prince of the spoken word was robbed of this faculty before unconsciousness overtook him. A study of his handwriting suggests that he was right-handed and this aphasia could well have been due to an abscess in the left temporal lobe secondary to otitis media. Of course, his aphasia may have been part of the clouding of the senses which so often precedes the final coma of intracerebral suppuration. If he had suffered from uncomplicated leptomeningitis then delirium sufficiently wild to have been noteworthy would have preceded the final coma. Thus it seems likely that he had a temporal lobe abscess in the dominant hemisphere secondary to chronic suppurative otitis media.

At any rate the priest received Wilde into the Roman Catholic Church and administered Baptism and Extreme Unction. Soon after he lapsed into coma to die some thirty-six hours later.

If my assumption as to the cause of his death is correct, then his habits and way of life played little or no part in his early demise. The skin rash attributed to mussel poisoning could well have been allergy or a vitamin deficiency such as is often associated with chronic alcoholism.

However, whether or no he by his acts encouraged his own demise, there can be no doubt that by his egotism and by his self-indulgence he brought about his social and artistic suicide. He once said:

> "To fall in love with oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance."

In the only work that he wrote after coming out of prison, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol", there occurs repeatedly the theme:

> "For each man kills the thing he loves,
> Yet each man does not die."

I think that Oscar Wilde must have been thinking of himself when he wrote this.

The one infirmity which is mentioned from time to time by his contemporaries was deafness in one ear. His final illness was ushered in by an operation on one ear, and I cannot do better than quote Frank Harris who said:

> "The sore place in his ear caused by the fall when he fainted that Sunday morning in Wandsworth Prison Chapel formed into an abscess and was the final cause of his death."

Frank Harris was right when he predicted the result of Oscar Wilde's libel suit against Queensberry and on the evidence available then, and with our knowledge now, I think that his is the likeliest explanation of the last illness and death of Oscar Wilde; and I offer it to you as it stands because after all Frank Harris had the advantage over all of us and over many who have written about Wilde since, that he knew the patient well.

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